



The Blue Sheet

Practical Application of Iowa's Blueprint for Permanency

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Reunification:

Returning a Child Home Safely and Permanently

Reunification of a child with their family must be built on a foundation of good practice. Permanency is directly related to key practices and many, many case decisions over the life of the case. Lack of sound decisions or quality practice in **any** of the following areas of practice can result in significant delays or success in permanency for the child:

- Comprehensive assessment of the child's and parents' needs;
- Family team understanding of the child's and parents' needs and viable permanency options;
- Family team collaboration, communication, and monitoring/tracking of progress toward achieving permanency;
- Child and family engagement and shared decision making;
- Case planning, timely permanency decisions, and effectiveness of

strategies to achieve permanency;

- Timely court reviews and meaningful permanency hearings;
- Maintaining a stable, nurturing, and permanent placement;
- Transition planning for safe case closure; and
- Ongoing informal or community supports to maintain family change and/or provide ongoing support to meet the needs of the family.

The expectations for practice are very high and the required timeframes are very short to complete the sequence of tasks required for a child's successful return home. There needs to be an urgent and prolonged focus on reunification to promote safe and timely reunification.

Spotlight on Family Interaction

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Family Interaction is an evidence-based practice central to the reunification process, with the primary purpose of maintaining and promoting the parent-child relationship and reducing the sense of abandonment which a child experiences at placement. For parents, it is the time to: enhance their ability to adequately and appropriately care for and relate to the child; develop appropriate parenting behaviors; and identify and resolve problems before the child returns home. Frequent and developmentally appropriate family interaction is the strongest indicator of family reunification. Interactions provide the opportunity for families to: maintain relationships, enhance well-being, learn, practice and demonstrate new behaviors and patterns of interaction. Interactions should be guided by a family interaction plan that encourages progressive increase in a parent's responsibility and increase in frequency and duration of family time. Family interaction plans must never be used as a threat or form of discipline to the child or to control or punish the parent.

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Principles of Safe and Permanent Reunification

- BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING ● REUNIFICATION DECISIONS ●
- PROMOTE REUNIFICATION THROUGH EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE ●
- PREPARATION, TIMING AND PLANNING FOR REUNIFICATION ●
- SUPPORTS AND SAFE CASE CLOSURE ●

Begin at the Beginning

Planning for returning a child home safely and permanently begins when the decision is made to place a child. It is at this point the conditions that must be in place for the child to return safely home are developed. Conditions for return not only provide clear expectations for parents... “what must be different for a child to return home safely”, but they set the direction ... a map for change.

“Statements about conditions for return are powerful, useful communication that assures that everyone involved from caregivers to attorneys to caseworkers are well informed, have the same understanding, and are focused on removal and return as safety management issues” rather than case plan requirements.¹ **A child should be returned to the family home as soon as it is conditionally safe, not when all the case plan requirements are achieved.** When conditions for return are not based on safety alone, they “fail to provide clear, fair, and equitable direction and explanation to caregivers about what is necessary for family reunification. *Additionally, these approaches can contribute to*

“raising the bar” from the reason for the placement to something higher – a different standard for getting a child home than the reason the child was placed. One value of identifying conditions for return is respect for caregivers and compassion for how families experience and feel about separation.”²

Conditions of Return
Caregivers are empowered by knowing:

- what the rules are,
- what the expectations are,
- they are being treated fairly,
- that the rules will not change, and
- judgments will be fairly made against agreements reached when children are removed.

Promote Reunification through Evidence-Based Practice

“Family Reunification: What the Evidence Shows,”³ an article in the Child Welfare Information Gateway, identifies the following practices to support timely reunification:

- Successful reunification must be systematically considered and planned for from the

earliest possible point in the life of the case. Timeframes for reunification must be based on the individual needs of the child and family, not on arbitrary timeframes.

- Engage father, mother, and child through: recognition of their strengths, establishing open, honest communication, and developing trust. Promote shared decision making – look for every opportunity for the family to define their own needs and make decisions about how to address them. Mutually established goals are critical to successful reunification. Non-custodial parents must be engaged at the beginning to prevent delays in permanency and enhance the child’s connections and family resources.
- A comprehensive assessment that identifies underlying issues, coupled with a clear identification of what behavioral change needs to occur to assure safety of the child is critical to successful reunification.
- Understanding the child’s and family’s circumstances, environment, and potential is required to identify each family’s unique needs, determine the extent of the risk to the child, and to develop an intervention plan. Clear expectations of family change keeps the family and those trying to help the family on the same path.
- Targeted services that meet the individualized needs of

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<http://www.actionchildprotection.org/>

² Ibid

³ <http://www.childwelfare.gov/>

child and family are key to achieving family reunification and ensuring child's safety. Services should be practical and comprehensive. The most effective treatment involves all members of the family and addresses not only parenting skills, but also parent-child interaction and a range of parental life competencies, such as communication, problem solving and anger control.

- Keep the foster care placement stable through meeting the needs of the foster parents. Promote a good relationship between the foster parents and the family; a good relationship between the parents and foster parents reduces the stress of divided loyalties and can ease transition home for the child by providing the parents with ongoing informal supports.
- Focus on **Family Interaction**: Schedule interactions between the parents and their child early and often in the placement to promote the parent's relationship with the child. Use those contacts to help the father and mother develop their parenting, nurturing, and disciplining skills. Provide instruction and reinforcement in performance and completion of mutually agreed upon activities. Frequent interaction is linked to both the likelihood of reunification and post reunification stability.
- Both the frequency and nature of the caseworker's contact with the family are important to family reunification. Use regular visits with the child, father, and mother to monitor effectiveness of interventions and measure progress toward the necessary family change identified in the assessment process.

- Quality case notes and a transition plan between workers to assure continuity of goals and strategies is required if there is a worker change.
- Quality transition planning that includes establishing lasting informal supports and crisis or relapse planning is critical to prevent reentry into foster care. Post reunification services contribute to positive

Frequent interaction between the foster child and the family is linked to both the likelihood of reunification and post reunification stability.

outcomes.

Reunification Decision

The goal is to return the child at the earliest point where the child can successfully remain home safely and permanently. Determining when to return the child safely must be based on the same safety constructs that were used in determining that the child could not remain home safely. An evaluation of the threats of maltreatment, vulnerability of the child, and the protective capacities of the family is required with particular focus on the parental capacity and the conditions that affected the parental capacity. A specific and realistic safety plan can assure the child's safety while there is continued work on the underlying issues that impact parental capacity and the vulnerability of

the child. There is a distinct difference between the criteria for returning the child home safely and permanently and safe case closure. *Safe case closure criteria do not have to be met to return a child home.* A reunification decision is based on safety where there may continue to be risk factors addressed in the case planning process. There is the expectation that we will continue to provide ongoing assessment and services to mitigate risk and address underlying issues related to the threat of maltreatment while continued progress is made toward safe case closure.

Planning the Transition to Home

Planning for transition home should be an ongoing process while the child is in foster care. It really is the focus of the work with the family whose child is removed. **Timing** is critical. Complete planning, considering waiting lists for services. Identify things that might undermine the transition home and address them directly. Family Team Decision-Making Meeting with the family and informal supports can be held to complete the planning tasks. The following questions should be addressed at the family team decision-making meeting:

- What do the parents and child need to know, be able to do, and have as supports to be successful during the transition period?
- Are services available and accessible at the level of effort required to assure safety in the home?
- Who will assure effective implementation of the plan and make sure that the necessary actions occur as planned?
- Are there issues relating to school transition?

- Who is responsible for monitoring, after-care support, and problem-solving during the adjustment period?
- Is the safety plan well thought-out, identifying the most suitable people to implement it, taking the necessary actions frequently enough to control the safety threats, and/or substitute for the diminished caregiver protective capacities?
- Will a crisis plan be needed to guide the family if something goes wrong with the plan?

Using Evidence-Based Practice to Assure Successful Reunification

Description of the Family and Safety Issue: Evan and Talisha are the young parents of a newborn and lack the knowledge, skill, and ability to provide the care needed by their 2 month old daughter, Lillie. They are intellectually and social immature, which affects their decision-making and motivation to meet the constant needs of an infant. They were observed handling the child roughly.

Pre-placement Conference: A pre-placement conference was held to share assessment information, and plan the transition to relative care. The paternal grandparents will provide temporary care. Conditions for safe reunification include:

- During the child's transition home, the paternal grandparents will be present within the home every day to perform caregiving for Lillie, and teach, demonstrate and provide hands-on teaching and reinforcement of child-caring skills to Evan and Talisha,
- Evan and Talisha will handle Lillie gently, carefully and understand the importance of doing so.
- Evan and Talisha have a plan for providing basic care, understand the plan, can describe what they will do and generally understand why it is necessary. The plan must include feeding, bathing, playing with Lillie, maintaining a schedule, and making sure that Lillie gets regular sleeping times.
- Evan and Talisha understand their responsibilities as parents; they can say what the consequences for Lillie might be if they don't do what is best for her.

Family Interaction: Arrangements were made for daily family interaction each morning with the mother and father, supervised by the paternal grandparents. During the visits, the grandparents will mentor the young parents in child caring skills. The parents will attend all well-baby visits and will receive help to understand the child's developmental and medical needs. Family interaction will be an opportunity for the parents to share with the paternal grandparents what they are learning in parenting classes. As the parents are ready to practice their skill, they will do so under the guidance and supervision of the grandparents.

Family Team Decision-Making Meeting for Reunification and Transition Planning: At the transition planning meeting, a safety plan was developed. It was determined that:

- The home environment is stable enough to sustain the use of an in-home safety plan.
- Caregivers are willing to be involved and cooperate with the use of an in-home safety plan.
- Safety services are available and accessible at the level of effort required to assure safety in the home.
- Safety service providers are committed to participating in the in-home safety plan
- The in-home safety plan will provide the proper level of supervision and effort to manage safety threats.
- There have been specific changes in family circumstances and/or protective capacities that would allow for the use of an in-home safety plan.

The parents shared their plan for providing basic care to Lillie, and demonstrated that they understand the importance of the plan. They described learning and demonstrating feeding, bathing, playing with Lillie, maintaining a schedule, and making sure that Lillie gets regular sleeping times. Evan and Talisha understand their responsibilities as parents; they can say what the consequences for Lillie might be if they don't do what is best for her. Transition services will be provided to support the parents, including daily support and supervision by the grandparents. The Public Health Nurse and FSRP worker will provide weekly ongoing supervision of the child's care during transition and provide the parents with additional child care knowledge and assist with problem solving.

